Washington State
Environmental Public Health Tracking Network

School Health Initiative ~

Environmental factors play a significant role in the quality of public health. Children are more susceptible to the harmful effects of agents in the environment due to their developing bodies, their body size, and their behaviors. On average, children spend approximately one-third of their day within school facilities and on school grounds, which can result in significant environmental exposures from agents both indoors and outdoors. The Washington State Department of Health (DOH), in cooperation with the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), is pursuing the development and implementation of electronic systems for the collection of environmental and student health data from selected school districts as part of a pilot project. This pilot project is just one component in the development of Environmental Public Health Tracking Network (EPHTN) infrastructure in Washington State, which is being funded by a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Specific activities of this school pilot project include the following:

1. Characterization and evaluation of existing electronic school-based student illness and environmental data collection systems,
2. Development of a systematic electronic student health and environmental quality surveillance system based on existing system strengths,
3. Implementation of a prototype surveillance system in three school districts as part of a pilot demonstration project,
4. Conducting an analysis of these data and evaluation of system strengths and weaknesses.

A fundamental goal of this project is the development of electronic student health and environmental quality surveillance systems. Data from these systems will be used to gain a more detailed understanding of the relationship between school environmental conditions (e.g. usage of pesticides, indoor air quality, etc.) and illness among students and staff. This system will also provide significant value to school and other health officials by providing data on background illness rates and environmental conditions, as well as provide a mechanism for the possible early detection of disease outbreaks or changes in environmental factors. Ultimately, we envision that the proposed surveillance system will benefit individuals and schools through improved health, reduced absenteeism, and ultimately improved academic performance.

The first year of this project was devoted to identification, characterization and evaluation of existing national and state systems for the collection of student health data. As part of this effort and to accomplish future objectives, an interagency agreement amendment (IAA) between the DOH Office of Environmental Health Assessments and OSPI was signed in September 2003 concerning initial surveillance system development planning and organization.

For more information on this project, please contact Glen Patrick 360.236.3177 or at (g.patrick@doh.wa.gov).